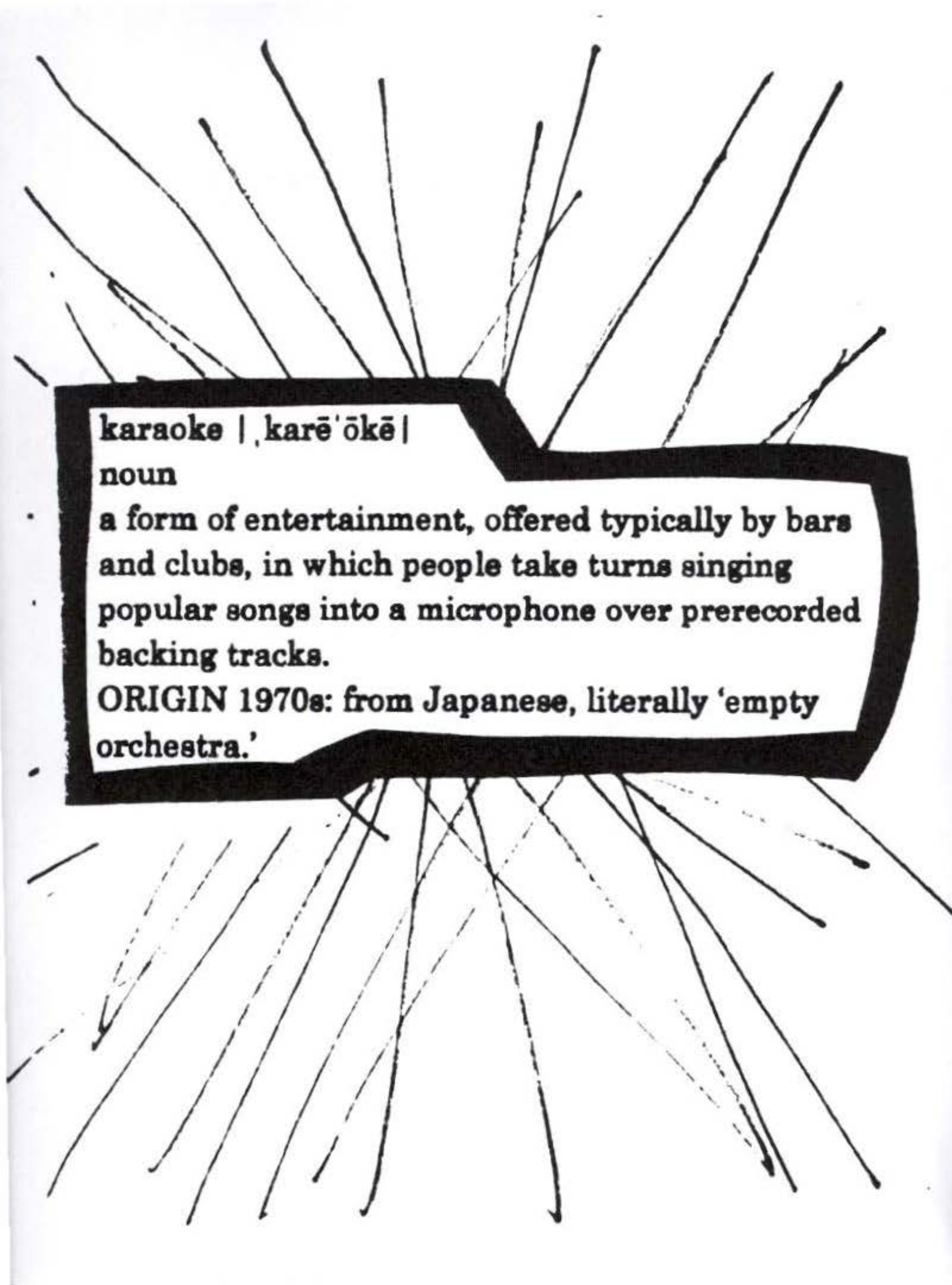


EMPTY

ORCH-

ESTRA

no. 1.



karaoke | ,karē'ōkē |

noun

a form of entertainment, offered typically by bars and clubs, in which people take turns singing popular songs into a microphone over prerecorded backing tracks.

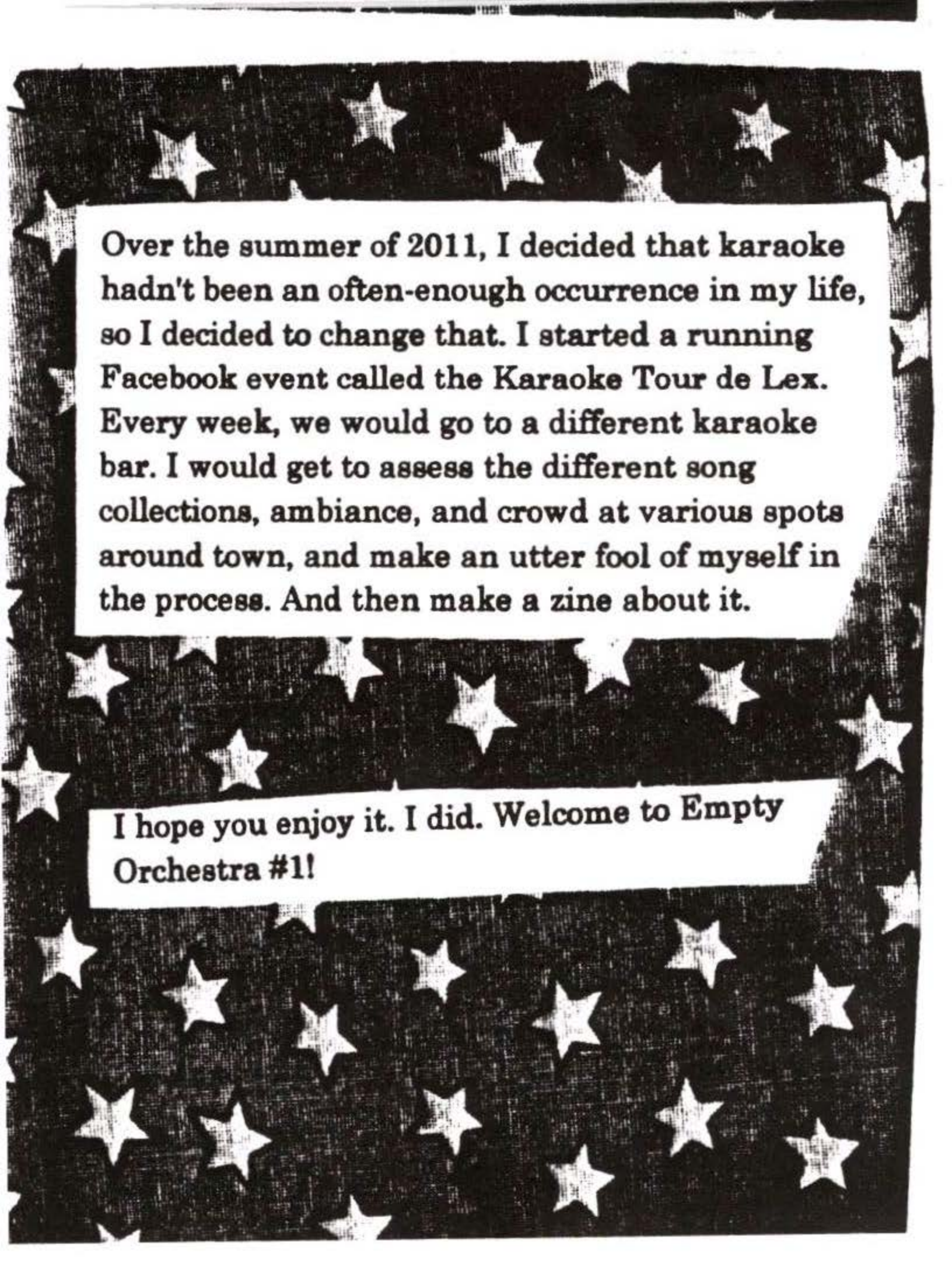
ORIGIN 1970s: from Japanese, literally 'empty orchestra.'

FULL DISCLOSURE: I am one of those people who drags her friends to karaoke bars. I can't help it. It runs in my family. My mom and dad are both fairly extroverted music-lovers. Quite a few years ago, before I was old enough to go to karaoke bars or before I had any interest in going to them, they rented a karaoke machine for their New Year's party. We had it for a week. At first I disdained it, but I tried it eventually, and I fell in love.

I started with songs I knew by heart already -- Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, The Cure, Green Day. The thrill of singing in front of others was novel and addictive: the petty adrenaline rush, the novelty of hearing my voice amplified. I invited some friends over to the New Year's party. About 40 of them showed up. My mother was not pleased. After a gang-vocal version of "Rock the Casbah," I told everyone they had to leave. Disappointed, they cleared out. Apparently karaoke was quite popular!


During the quiet afternoons of the week leading up to the New Year, I learned most of the words to REM's "It's the End of the World" and realized that the end of the song was repetitive and boring, but the quick stream-of-consciousness part was fun and challenging. A few years later I sang it at a bar, nailed it, and a guy bought me a beer to congratulate me: a La Fin Du Monde.

So, when with my friends, if we've exhausted the potential fun of a coffeeshop or show, or we're not sure where to go on a Friday night, or I'm sick of dancing at the one decent gay bar in town (and trust me, the dance floor of which I speak is spectacular: it's all neon and mirrors, descended from outer space in 1981, and the DJ spins predictably-mixed Billboard Top 40 jams)... I suggest karaoke. After all, Lexington, Kentucky doesn't have the oh-so-frenetic social calendar of many neighboring towns, and you have to find fun wherever it's happening, or make it yourself.



Over the summer of 2011, I decided that karaoke hadn't been an often-enough occurrence in my life, so I decided to change that. I started a running Facebook event called the Karaoke Tour de Lex. Every week, we would go to a different karaoke bar. I would get to assess the different song collections, ambiance, and crowd at various spots around town, and make an utter fool of myself in the process. And then make a zine about it.

I hope you enjoy it. I did. Welcome to Empty Orchestra #1!



Todd's Karaoke Bar and Grille
828 Lane Allen Road
Lexington, KY 40508

Todd's Karaoke Bar and Grille is on Lane Allen Rd, nestled behind a Home Depot, in the same strip mall complex as a Big Lots, a game shop called The Rusty Scabbard, a Chinese restaurant that always looks closed, and Cash America Pawn & Check Advance. The cultural epicenter of a bottom-rung commercial Bermuda Triangle. Though location is somewhat peculiar (as is the decor - a leftover assortment of holiday decorations that never get taken down), it somehow adds to its charm. The crumbling parking lot, the closed storefronts of pawn shops and nail salons, the battered cars assembled out front, arranged haphazardly, as if the occupants were so eager (or drunk) that they felt no need to heed traffic etiquette: these conspire to enhance, not detract from, the full Todd's experience.

Todd's doesn't open until it gets dark, which is probably for the best. The sticky, carpeted floor, duct-taped seats and tattered tablecloths wouldn't be as endearing if exposed to sunlight. In fact, I think they might deteriorate. It fancies itself a "Bar and Grille." They get the "bar" part spot-on, standard choices like Bud or Bud Light, Coors or Coors Light, Miller or Miller Light, cheap vodka, cheap whiskey, canned juice, and soda. But the "grille" part? I think they might have had some bags of chips somewhere. I'm glad I didn't go expecting actual food.

The first time I went to Todd's, it was summer, and the last dying rays of the day kissed the tinted windows as the door was opened to the smoking, hollering regulars outside. I stepped in, head down, and found a table at which to peruse the song selection. The hefty binder sat, spine broken, rings off-kilter like cracked ribs, on a table in the corner. Little slips of paper and failing ballpoint pens were strewn on various tables from

the parade of nights before. I leafed through the wavy pages, trying to decipher the tiny print in the poor light, and waited for my friends to arrive. Three Library & Information Sciences students, a co-worker, and one guest made it to the bar. That sounds like the beginning of a bad joke. Anyway, we pored over the collection in the fading daylight that snuck in from the parking lot. Vague wafts of old cigarettes and car exhaust swirled around and mingled with the musty carpet and stale beer smells. I ordered a Miller High Life and scribbled some tiny letters and numbers onto a slip of paper, which I gave to a man sitting in front of a computer attached to the bar. Turns out he was Todd.


A guy walked by our table with a box of delivery breadsticks, making small talk with us in order to brag about being a professional singer who came to Todd's to keep his vocal cords strong. He knocked out the crowd, not with his song

selections, which were pretty weak and modern, but his range, which was impressive. He introduced himself as Josh.

Alanna, a fellow LIS student, was classically trained in singing but had never done karaoke. Eager to get more people on the stage, I insisted that she choose a song and give it a shot. She chose a song from the Phantom of the Opera. When it came on, Josh ran into the bar from outside, exclaiming to us -- "This song has a male and a female part!! Should I get up there??" To which I could only say, "YES!! DO IT!!" He faltered. "But, does she know me? Would that be weird?" I shook my head. "No, it's not weird, we know you! You're Josh!" That was convincing enough for him, and he swept the mic off its stand just in time to start "All I Ask of You."

The force of both of their strong, well-trained voices overpowering the cheap synth version of an opera song brought the bar to a grinding halt. Everyone sitting at the bar gawked at the stage, unable to process what was unfolding at the back

of the room. People leered in from outside. Nobody at our table knew what to think. It was kind of beautiful, the two of them, the meek librarian-in-training and the self-assured, fashionable dude, singing like they had a real audience instead of a mostly empty bar, standing easily onstage in front of the broken chair and the tinsel curtain and poor lighting, wiping the grimy edges of the world away for a second.



Chinoe Pub & Restaurant
1050 Chinoe Road
Lexington, KY 40502

The second stop on the Karaoke Tour de Lex, the Chinoe Pub is kind of an open secret. It's a more legitimate 'grill' and bar than Todd's, since I was actually able to order and consume cheese fries in addition to a variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. Chinoe Pub is nestled in a new-ish, well-groomed subdivision and shares a giant parking lot with a huge grocery store, smoothie place, tanning salon, and other distractions for the nouveau riche.

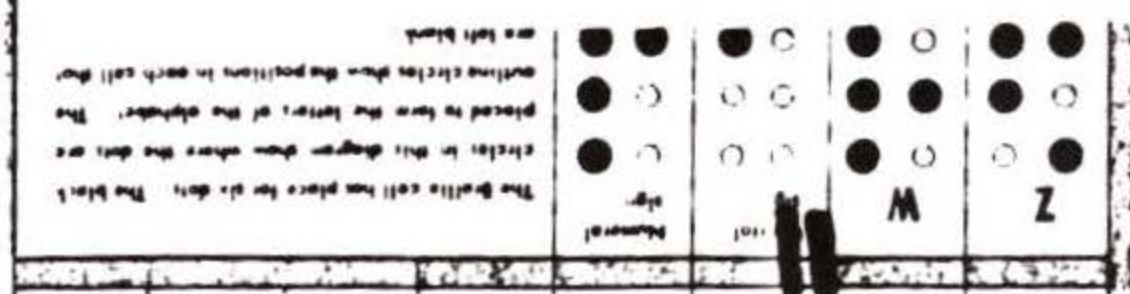
Despite its affluent surroundings, it's a rather humble bar. In fact, I couldn't figure out which door was the actual entrance to the place when I arrived, and wandered into a fluorescent liquor

store before actually finding the entrance to the bar. The doors were nearly juxtaposed, but the bar entrance was so dark that the place looked closed. The entryway was cramped and poorly lit, and a sketchy-looking dude asked to see my ID. The sound of people and glasses clinking was audible from the vestibule; when I walked in there was little seating left, and I had friends on the way. Maybe the sketchy-dude-and-darkened-door routine was to keep the room at, but not over, capacity. I staked out a spot in the back of the bar and waited. The floor was all terra cotta tiles, with wood furnishings and beige walls. The whole place is very brown.

I was early. None of my friends had arrived yet, so I settled in and leafed through a stray binder. Some friends made the trek to the burbs on two wheels, along with a crew of punks on bikes. The bar filled up quickly, and the karaoke queue ended up exceeding the time allotted for singing to happen. Over the course of the night, we each got one time onstage. I could have chosen better, but


the night was still a lot of fun. There were some obvious regulars, one of whom 'needed no introduction,' who apparently sang 'Shoop" every Friday night before the customary dance set around midnight.

The clientele at the Chinoe Pub isn't as reflective of the neighborhood as I assumed it would be -- it seemed that there were people from all over town, and a lot of them were pretty serious singers. This would be the kind of place someone would go to get "discovered," but I went to have a good time, and was able to do that pretty well, too. My crew and I spent a lot of the evening dancing and making a spectacle of ourselves, enjoying the fact that we didn't fit in. We sang along to songs we didn't know and made up interpretive dance moves to express the horrible pop music, filtered through synths and accompanied by unsure, drunken howlers.



At the end of my evening, I was asked by one of my new friends to join him on some other adventure, with insinuations of lonesomeness and a desire to go out dancing and maybe spoon. I guess karaoke puts some people in the mood. Had I not been nauseated by excessive cheesy-fry consumption earlier that night, I would have at least gone for the dancing. Instead, another friend of mine went off with him into the night, and they showed up together to the next Tour de Lex night, adorably, on a tandem bike.





Southland Bowling Lanes
205 Southland Drive
Lexington, KY 40508

A lot of golf courses have a clubhouse called "The 19th Hole." This bowling alley, Southland Lanes, has an "Eleventh Frame." After the game is over, and it's time to relax, but still hang out with friends and not go home yet, you go to the mythical bonus round at the end of the game where you sit around and pay for beers to drink. And, in this case, watch friends and strangers serenade you.

The Eleventh Frame doesn't have a bar along one side; it juts out into the middle of the room, a big island lined with stools and surrounded by tables. There is a little linoleum dancefloor and a stage about eight inches off the ground. The room is pretty well-lit, and smells like dusty carpet and bowling shoes. It's charmingly outdated, but falls short of retro. When my friends and I go, they

always run out of Blue Moon Belgian White, but they have extra orange slices we can put in our Pabst. The first time I went, there was a table of older folks, some that seemed entertained and/or to be having a good time, and a couple that sent disapproving glares our way all night.

I've seen two different guys running karaoke at Southland. The first guy, who I've seen at both places, resembles Kevin Smith, and he brings a computer with a blown-out monitor to search for songs in some database that looks like it was designed in the late 1990s. The song selection seems to have music that is more modern than the software used to search for it, which is nice, but the monitor renders poorly and you may feel way drunker or visually impaired than you actually are (especially if you're sober) when you try to look at the names and numbers!

Kevin Smith's song selection is gargantuan, and there are usually multiple listings of very popular songs. I guess this is because there are a few

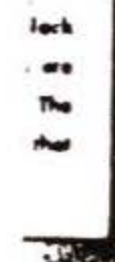
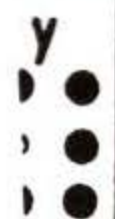
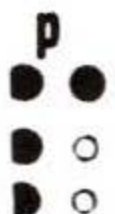
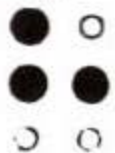




major karaoke 'labels' and they cover some of the same ground, but it's perplexing when you just want to sing a song and there's more than one version of it. I've gotten some weird, off-tempo renditions that were shorter than I expected, but I can never remember which company made what version. Perhaps that's part of the fun?

Anyway, Kevin Smith was the KJ the first time I visited Southland Lanes for bowling and karaoke. I sat through a lot of crooning by an old man named George. He broke my heart every time, and had obviously lost someone and was taking it out on all of us with caterwauled renditions of "You Were Always on My Mind" and "Achy Breaky Heart." He wore a jean jacket and cowboy boots, and had probably driven a few counties over in a big, rusty pickup to the Big City of Lexington to sing us some songs.

My friends and I had a grand old time. There were about ten of us, and we took over the well-lit room with ease. There were probably only 25 people in



the bar, including us. A woman who sat in the same corner as George got up and did a spectacular "Rocky Top," which I thought was called "Rocket Pop" when I was a kid. I was a little disappointed when I found out that it was about some mountain and not popsicles. She played one hell of an air banjo though, which lifted my spirits. My partner, a relatively introverted dude, got up and sang Motorhead's "Ace of Spades," and we later did a duet version of Danzig's "Mother," which attracted glares from the Table of Elderly Judgment in the corner.

One of my buddies did two songs: "Life During Wartime," to which I danced and sang every word, and "Rodeo," which I hadn't heard before but was secretly delighted by. There are so many songs that are accidentally homoerotic, it's amazing. "Rodeo" is definitely one of them. It's about this woman who is sad because she knows her partner's heart belongs to the rodeo, not her. And

some of the lyrics, "It's boots and chaps and cowboy hats/It's spurs and latigo/It's the ropes and the reins/And the joy and the pain/And they call the thing rodeo" really just send me images of a Western-themed gay bar. Maybe that's just me. It's kind of like when my lovely butch friend sang "Magic Carpet Ride" one night -- that song's context has been altered forever, infused with secret hilarity and a homosexual agenda.



The second time I went to Southland, there was a different KJ, and he resembled a suburban dad. When I saw him, he was wearing khaki shorts and running shoes, and a polo shirt hung from his spare, tall frame. His song collection was small and eclectic, and had a lot of country songs I had never heard of.

Some of my coworkers were at Southland that evening, as were a few Library Science buddies. We bowled a few games and then retired to the Eleventh Frame's warm glow (a refuge from the

blacklights and laser displays of "Cosmic Bowling," which was cool for a while but made my eyes tired). My esteemed co-worker (and trombone player in the March Madness Marching Band) Captain Commanokers and I decided to sing "Jungle Boogie," which has about four words in it, and we thought we would just sing those four words over and over... but were surprised when the other, non-word funk vocalizations were transcribed on screen for us. Lots of "huuh!" "ha!" and "chicka-wow!" that we didn't know how to deliver. We made up for this by beatboxing and doing a live remix of Kool and the Gang.

Later, we did the Gap Band's "You Dropped a Bomb on Me," which was equally repetitive and was subsequently remixed as well. Mostly, I made the whistle bomb-drop noise and acted like I was falling down a lot while Brian sang the actual words to the song, of which there are about twelve.

In addition to a strange, small cd collection, Suburban Dad also had a bunch of laserdiscs. They were not only novel for their antiquity, but also because they contained generic videos for the songs on them! I got to witness the glory of "Careless Whispers" and "Cat's in the Cradle." One was appropriately sleazy, lots of candlelight dinners and beach walks, and the other had ample shots of a sad kid sitting around. You can probably guess which is which. I had wanted to do "Careless Whispers" because I was inspired by a youtube video (in which a guy in tight shiny pants shows up at various shops and schools and plays the saxophone solo from that song and gets kicked out of each place), but someone else got to it first, and I hate to do the same song twice in one night.

My buddy from the Library Science program and I had taken our comprehensive exam (the culmination of our program and the last big thing you have to do to get a degree in Library Science at my college), and we sang "Friends in Low Places," with an ad-libbed lyric about not having

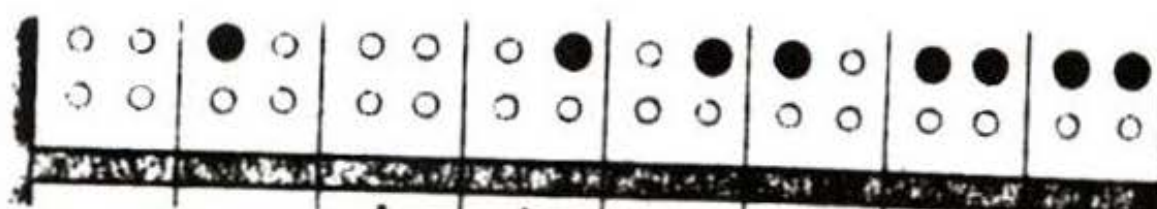
our scores back yet and being stressed about it. Of course, we are both nerds and totally passed, and are now graduates of the program. Tragically, nothing I sang that night was on laserdisc, and I haven't seen Suburban Dad again since that fateful night.



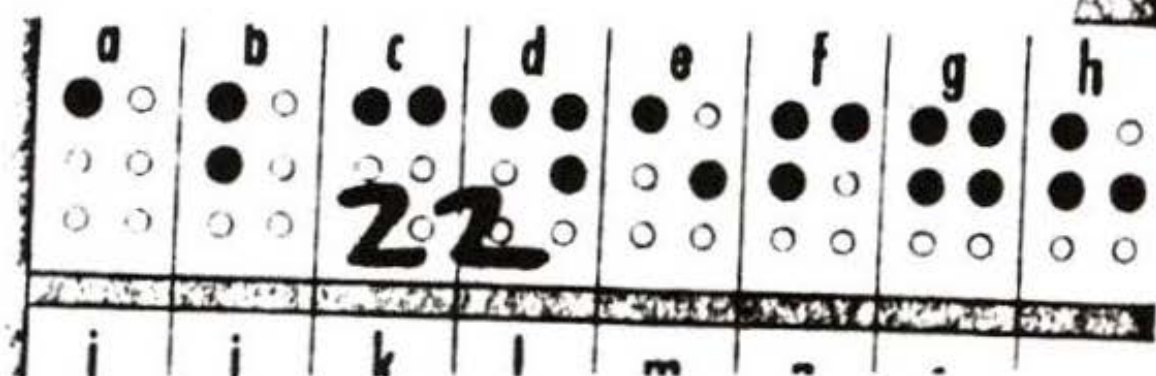
Kevin Smith (the KJ) was hosting on the night that I went to Eastland Lanes in search of amateur singing and drunken debauchery. Two friends were with me, I was the designated driver, and we expected an interesting evening. I love the idea of a karaoke bar in the same place as a bowling alley -- I could want for little more in life...


But not all karaoke bars in bowling alleys are created equal. Though Eastland and Southland lanes are both owned by the same company and sport the same grubby, party-themed carpeting, their interiors are arranged somewhat differently.

Simply put, the layout at Eastland's Eleventh Frame is a horrible setup for karaoke. The bar is a giant island in the middle of the room, which wouldn't be an issue except that it leaves a fifteen-foot border around it for tables and chairs evenly around the whole room. There's not really a place that would lend itself to being the center of attention (or even visible from most of the room, for that matter). The only light in the the bar was provided by fluorescent bulbs under glass shelves that held booze, an homage to swill. To sing karaoke at Eastland was to stand along one side of a dark room, with no audience to speak of. It fell short of my modest expectations.



The horrible fuzzy computer screen was back. A major problem with a giant database is that there's no easy browsing function. You have to dig up band names or song names on your own and type them in, and hope that they exist. I managed to find a few numbers I wanted to do, and had fun singing "Possum Kingdom," "Cumbersome," and "Basket Case." It was a 90s kind of night. My two friends sang "Cornflake Girl." Our finale for the evening was a sub-par "Total Eclipse of the Heart" with my friend screeching the words over my shoulder, because the KJ had passive-aggressively turned off her mic. I was amused.





**Panda Cuisine
2358 Nicholasville Road
Lexington, KY 40508**

My job is kind of awesome. I do audio production for the local university, interviewing professors and making podcasts of our conversations. It's fun, I learn a lot, and I work with some incredibly talented and interesting people. Each year, the college of arts & sciences (at the university for whom I work) focuses on a country and does a series of events, presentations, and classes about that place. Last year's country was South Africa (and anti-apartheid all-stars showed up - I got to meet Nelson Mandela's former cellmate, famous saboteurs, and interview lots of people about it). This year it's China, and for Chinese New Year, the Dean reserved a restaurant, Panda Cuisine, for an evening of delicious food, oolong tea, rice wine and karaoke for staff and their friends & families.

From a previous work outing (which culminated in various funk classics holding places in my heart foreverrr), I had made a reputation for myself as quite the karaoke performer. Most of the people from work were eager for karaoke to start, but nobody wanted to go first. A few of the people who bore witness to my killer stage presence in the past prodded me to do the first song.

Unfortunately, Captain Commanokers was sick and unable to attend -- otherwise, I think we would have broken the ice together. I obliged to go it alone and sparked a long evening of extroversion. The karaoke selection was in Korean, Chinese and English, which resulted in somewhat slim pickings. I always wish I knew more vapid pop songs when flipping through a trilingual karaoke guidebook, but I'm usually relieved that I don't as soon as the moment passes and I find something I actually know.

In most karaoke places I've been, the screen is a solid color with words on it that change color as

you are supposed to sing them. At Panda Cuisine, the background is a bunch of European tourism videos. There are fields of swaying Dutch tulips, windmills turning lazily in the wind, the changing of the guard outside of Buckingham Palace, the Eiffel Tower being majestic, people clogging at Oktoberfest, trains pulling out of stations, French chefs wheeling out fabulous cheeses and breads, families feeding ducks in a pond. The words were superimposed on this endless loop of smiling white people and their habitats, the lyrics are really an afterthought. The video loop often made my brain do some tangential free-association until I had connected the random images and the lyrics.




I sang "Sweet Caroline" with a tall man I had never met before, and watched a woman sing "We Are Family" while a lot of middle-aged folks in rumpled work clothes trotted out to the front of

the room to sway around together. Cheesy as it is, she was onto something. I do feel at home with these folks. I am glad that I've mixed up with them. We have fun together, and we take care of

each other, and I'm going to enjoy it while it lasts. It's because of these folks and this job that I've

decided to stay in Lexington, to make this place my home.



**Silver Cue Billiards Bar
694 East New Circle Road
Lexington, KY 40505**

The Silver Cue is close to Eastland Lanes, and, as the name indicates, is a pool hall. It was the first place I've ever been that had its own karaoke room. It's a giant building, full of well-spaced pool tables, overhanging light fixtures, and dartboards. All of the pool tables glow, their electric blue felt bouncing fluorescence all over the place, casting pallid light up onto players' faces. There's a side room with tables and chairs, a dancefloor, more dartboards, a weird arcade basketball-shooting game, and a little KJ booth. There are unevenly spaced bathrooms, bored-looking waitresses that walk by every ten minutes to see if you need more to eat or drink, and a proprietor with a meticulously shaped mustache.

A woman with frizzy brown hair was running the show for the evening, perched in a wooden booth adorned with some illegibly sparkly posterboard advertising something about St. Patrick's Day. Sometimes she would put herself in the queue and sing under the flailing, seizure-inducing multicolored disco light.

This place was, for me, the culmination of my karaoke zine research, though I have heard tell of other karaoke destinations in my fair city. *Why, you ask, is this weird pool hall the end of the line?* The reason wasn't apparent to me until I arrived. A faded, flickering marquee sat in the parking lot by the four-lane highway, and it read: "KARAOKE CONTEST FRIDAY." As I pulled into the parking lot, I smiled to myself. I was going to compete!

I arrived before any of my friends, and got a feel for the place. There were lonesome strangers and regrettable fashion choices. There were six full binders, organized by artist. This place, like Panda Cuisine, also had non-standard backgrounds for the songs, but there were four, and they repeated in order all night: the earth rotating slowly, some flames, the moon and some stars, and this purple and white display that looked sort of like a wormhole screensaver.

I watched the people around me. There was a big table of people, including a couple that had some of the most brazen pagan tattoos I've ever seen. Their parents and friends arrived, ate hot wings. The table filled up with empty bottles and progressively louder conversation. The Silver Cue crowd seemed to attract neighborhood folks; most of the attendees seemed to know one another, and went outside in groups to smoke. One guy brought his own wireless mic so he could wander around the room and croon. He looked like Crocodile


Dundee and sang "Dance Naked" in a gravelly off-key sotto voce. He kept smiling at me, his missing front teeth making the whole thing even more uncomfortable. There was a methed-out older lady who read lyrics really loud in monotone, and applied her country grammar to the structure of songs. A woman who had to be in her sixties came up behind me and loudly asked me to dance. I politely refused, saying I had to save my energy for the contest, and learned about some new (and rather offensive) country songs.

So, back to this competition -- until tonight, I didn't even know that people *did* this. Most of my friends came and went before the contest, since it didn't start until after midnight on a Friday. My partner and I stayed awake until the end of the contest; we both sang. I did "It's Not Unusual," a favorite from my childhood. One of the first shows I ever attended was Tom Jones at this old theatre


in downtown Louisville. I thought maybe I stood a chance, since I got some good applause after belting out a bunch of WHOAOAOAOAHs, but the 'voting' was done after everyone had gone onstage. Winners were determined by how much applause and cheering they. The pagans and their big family cheered the loudest, so they went home victorious, though most of the other singers were arguably better.

After the contest was over, a man asked me if I sang professionally. He said he co-owned a record label. Seeing that as a thinly-veiled attempt at getting my phone number, I gave him my business card. He never got in touch.

The excitement for the evening done with, I got back into my car to drive home. The car needed some time to warm up, so I sat and watched other people get in their cars to go home, too. One couple got into a huge truck with an exhaust pipe



that went up behind the cab and chrome testicles hanging from the hitch. Another got into a rusty, jittery old sedan that was more rust than paint. I drove home, exhausted, but pleased to have had a new experience. I strive to pack as many of those in as possible.



• • • • •
• **Thanks:**

• Aaron, Alanna, Alexander, Alli, Aubree, Bill,
• Brandon, Caleb, Candice, Captain Commanokers,
• Carmen, Christian, Colleen, Cordia, Daisy,
• Double D, Ed, Eli, Enku, Este Pop, Georgios,
• Gerle Haggard, Harper, Heather, Ida, Jack, Jamie,
• Jessica, John, Lauren, Lot Six, Matthew, Mimi,
• Meghan, Nik, Paul, Ondine, Rachel, Sara, Sean,
• Shalan, Stephen, Tim, Whit, Will, Yaya, and
• everyone else who's joined me on a karaoke
• adventure, heckled me, danced with me, or given
• me a ride home.

• Do you have awesome karaoke stories? Reviews of
• places you've been? Ruminations on the social
• value of entertaining one another? Puns that
• involve pop song titles? Contribute to Empty
• Orchestra #2!

• neckmonster@gmail.com
• • • • •

MARCH 2012